DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 151 895 95 EA 010 344

TITLE Public Relations Programs. The Best of ERIC, Number 36.
INSTITUTION Oregon Univ., Eugene. ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Apr 78
CONTRACT 400-78-0007
NOTE 5p.
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403 (free)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrative Personnel; *Annotated Bibliographies; *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Communication Problems; Community Support; Elementary Secondary Education; Information Dissemination; Information Needs; *Public Relations; School Administration; *School Community Relationship

ABSTRACT

This bibliography contains annotations of 11 documents and journal articles covering various aspects of school public relations, including how to start a PR program, how to improve information dissemination and information gathering, the PR aspects of school violence, the role of the school business manager in PR, school publications, the PR aspects of school budget elections, and how to handle the PR problems presented by a teachers' strike. These materials are all listed in the ERIC indexes. (Author)

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Number 36 April 1978

The Best of ERIC

Clearinghouse on Educational Management

ED151895

The Best of ERIC presents annotations of ERIC literature on important topics in educational management.

The selections are intended to give the practicing educator easy access to the most significant and useful information available from ERIC. Because of space limitations, the items listed should be viewed as representative, rather than exhaustive, of literature meeting those criteria.

Materials were selected for inclusion from the ERIC catalogs ***Resources in Education (RIE)*** and ***Current Index to Journals in Education (CIJE).***

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Public Relations Programs

1. Bagin, Don. ***How to Start and Improve a P. R. Program.*** Evanston, Illinois: National School Boards Association. 1975. 54 pages. ED 111 070.

Bagin's guide reflects the trend away from emphasis on traditional public relations to emphasis on communications. As he points out, the image of "public relations" has suffered considerably in recent years; "communications and community-relations are purer-sounding and usually gain more public acceptance." Although many experts in this field make the same substitution, it is rather refreshing to run across an author willing to make explicit the reason for this transition.

The change, however, is more than a mere semantic alteration. As Bagin makes clear, communications is a two-way process, and the new concept of public relations means improving communication both within and outside the school. The internal audience (teachers, support staff) is as important as the external audience (the public).

To achieve this goal of effective and total communication, a school district must take very seriously its public relations efforts. Bagin lists common mistakes made by districts trying to initiate a PR program, including naming a teacher to be PR director on a part-time basis, "regarding the newly appointed communications specialist as little more than a writer of news releases," and starting a PR program without carefully defined objectives. All these mistakes betoken a lack of commitment on behalf of district leaders, a lack that has caused some districts' attempts to backfire "so explosively that all possibility of doing the job right was negated for years."

To ensure that administrative personnel are sufficiently committed to improving communications with internal and external audiences, Bagin recommends making communications skills a prerequisite for hiring new administrators; he lists sample questions covering different communications areas to be asked of job interviewees. He also suggests that "communications successes and failures" be made part of annual administrator evaluation.

To ensure that district employees gain "specific skills and confidence in the area of school public relations," he recommends that practical materials and knowledgeable consultants be utilized in inservice sessions for all school personnel (including secretaries, custodians, and cafeteria workers). Bagin has appended a "Yellow Pages" of resources useful for inservice programs in school public relations.

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2. Bagin, Don; Grazian, Frank; and Harrison, Charles. ***PR for School Board Members. A Guide for Members of Boards of Education and School Administrators to Improve and Strengthen School Information Programs.*** Volume 8, AASA Executive Handbook Series. Washington, D.C.; and Eugene, Oregon: American Association of School Administrators, and ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 1976. 74 pages. ED 127 656.

Although this handbook covers the expected and necessary PR program components (such as district publications and the handling of communications in crisis situations), perhaps its most interesting chapters deal with information gathering. The authors examine, in a fair amount of detail, how the district can obtain feedback from the community and how the school board can obtain information necessary for decision-making from the administration and other sources.

Among the sources of community input discussed by Bagin, Grazian, and Harrison are citizens advisory committees ("one of the most important feedback mechanisms in school communications") and "key communicators." Key communicators are people in the community "who talk to every segment of the public." These leaders (official and unofficial) can "often provide an instant barometer of community feeling and opinion while formal polls and surveys are being developed." The board and administration can tap the key communicators' response to program and policy changes before making final decisions.

The authors bolster their presentation with pertinent observations from other writers and with descriptions of PR policies and PR director job descriptions from various school districts across the country.

3. Banach, William J., and Barkelew, Ann H. ***The Banach-Barkelew Brainstorming Book.*** Utica, Michigan: Synergy Group. 1976. 44 pages. ED 141 896.

Banach and Barkelew point out that even though the public possesses a rather large quantity of information about the schools (such as the price of school lunches, bus schedules, and vacation dates), the quality of such information leaves a lot to be desired. Parents and other community members simply do not understand what is being taught to children and why.

To improve information quality, schools need to devise a public relations program that incorporates four components:

analyzing, planning, communicating, and evaluating. Banach and Barkelew, both PR consultants, believe that "disregard for this simple process is the main reason many educational communication programs fail." As they state, "Although the process appears trite, it works." And to get this process started, they advise educators to try their brainstorming strategy.

This strategy is intended to encourage district personnel (and parents and students) to pool ideas in order to come up with the best list of public relations innovations possible for their particular district. A step-by-step description of the brainstorming process—useful with groups as small as five or as large as several hundred—emphasizes the initial generation of a large quantity of ideas, then the selection and refinement of the best ideas. Appropriate forms and checklists are included for participants' use.

4. Gallagher, Donald R. "In Your Public Relations . . . Is It Tell All . . . or Top Secret?" ***School Business Affairs,*** 41 2 (February 1975), pp. 32-34. EJ 110 965.

"The school business office often does many routine things that hurt the school image internally and externally," according to Gallagher. Even though school business managers are not accustomed to thinking of themselves as public relations representatives, they should be apprised of the impact their actions have on public perceptions of the schools and on employees' perceptions of the school administration.

Gallagher lists suggestions intended to encourage business managers to "take the initiative and develop a program of communicating with the public and the employees." Business managers should avoid using educational and fiscal jargon when describing business procedures to the public; they should be able to interpret the school budget in terms that the public can understand. Inservice training for business staff members can help them to better fill their public relations roles.

To maintain smooth relations with local merchants and suppliers, the business manager should make sure that they are informed when and how the school will pay its bills. Gallagher recommends formation of an advisory council "of local citizens, business experts, and merchants" to provide the school with feedback and to encourage committee members to "relate the school business story to other members of the community."

5. Hilldrup, Robert P. "The PR Aspects of School Violence." ***Journal of Educational Communication,*** 1, 2 (September-October 1975), pp. 8-11. EJ 137 969.

Hilldrup's article deals with a phenomenon that all school administrators find unpleasant and that many find themselves unable to cope with—violence in the schools. Hilldrup, public information director for the Richmond, Virginia, public schools, urges school administrators to remove their heads from the sand and to "look at the PR implications of school violence, to admit that it can happen in your school system and to start thinking negatively in order to do something positive about it."

To start with, PR directors should check with other school districts to see what plans they have devised for handling the public relations aspects of school violence. Once district personnel (especially school principals) are convinced of the importance of planning for unpleasant contingencies, the PR director should encourage closer relations between school personnel and the police. Hilldrup advises making contact with a high ranking police officer "so that you can decide who will make what statement to whom after an incident happens."

Hilldrup's list of steps to be taken by the PR director once an incident of violence has occurred is commendably specific. For example, he suggests that media contacts in the time of crisis should be made "above the reporter level"—with the city editor or news editor; "an advance understanding at the management level" can facilitate the accurate dissemination of information. Radio should be the first priority, since it reaches many people quickly. Trust and candor should characterize the PR director's interaction with radio stations, as well as with other news media. Reporters should not be allowed to interview pupils on school property; however, no attempt should be made to interfere with media interviewing when pupils are off the school grounds.

The most essential thing is to make sure that the public information director is immediately informed as soon as an incident occurs; as he states, "there is no way you can serve the schools or the media if you are the last to know."

6. Jones, J. William. ***Budget/Finance Campaigns: You Can't Afford to Lose.*** Arlington, Virginia: National School Public Relations Association, 1977. 97 pages. ED 140 428.

A school budget campaign calls for all the public relations and communication expertise that the district can muster. Jones' book makes it quite clear that the election will be lost unless the school district makes campaigning a well-planned, year-round activity. As he states, " 'Love-Me-Suddenly' campaigns simply don't work."

Jones lists certain "givens" necessary for school budget passage. First, "the issue to be voted on must be reasonable, as economical as humanly possible, and perhaps most important of all, salable." He emphasizes that the budget should be stated in terms comprehensible to the average voter, not in "fiscal jargon that only an accountant can understand."

Citizen involvement and credibility are absolutely essential. Voters must believe what the school district tells them about school financial needs, and the best way to foster belief is by involving citizens in both the budget formulating process and in the campaign.

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1. National School Boards Association, 1055 Thomas Jefferson St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20007. $5.00.
2. American Association of School Administrators, 1801 N. Moore St., Arlington, VA 22209. Stock No. 021-00458. $2.50. Orders under $15 include payment plus $1.00 handling charge.
3. The Synergy Group, Inc., 53938 Sunderland, Utica, MI 48087. $2.95 prepaid.
4. Association of School Business Officials of the United States and Canada, 2424 W. Lawrence Ave., Chicago, IL 60625. Single copy of February 1975 issue, $1.00.
5. Educational Communication Center, P.O. Box 657, Camp Hill, PA 17011. Single copy of September-October 1975 issue, $3.00.
6. National School Public Relations Association, 1801 N. Moore St., Arlington, VA 22209. Stock No. 411-13335. $7.95. Orders under $8 include payment.
7. NSPRA (see No. 6). Stock No. 411-13449. $4.75.
8. New York State School Board Association, Inc., 111 Washington Ave., Albany, NY 12210. $3.00.
9. Educational Communication Center (see No. 5). Single copy of Winter 1977 issue, $3.00.
10. Not available. Journal no longer published.
11. Same as No. 5.

Jones points out that each campaign must be tailored to the specific characteristics and needs of the individual community; there is no one formula for election success. He places special importance on the district's first announcement of the campaign, which sets the tone for all campaign activities that follow. And he stresses that the district must honestly believe that it can win its budget election or it shouldn't "get on the ballot in the first place."

Jones' book will be of special interest to administrators in districts where budgets have been defeated in the past, since he not only includes suggestions from PR experts, but also summarizes the experiences of districts that have waged successful finance campaigns.

7. National School Public Relations Association. ***Releasing Test Scores: Educational Assessment Programs, How to Tell the Public.*** Arlington, Virginia: National School Public Relations Association, 1976. 67 pages. ED 119 322.

This NSPRA guide advises school leaders on how to handle a potentially unsettling event—the announcement of student achievement scores and educational assessment results. According to the authors, "At the local school district level, the quality of assessment communication to parents, staff members, community leaders and other important publics has been generally sub-par, even nonexistent." And yet, educational assessment programs and test scores are inextricably mixed with the whole issue of educational accountability.

Given the importance of assessment results, dissemination efforts must be carefully planned and executed at the individual school level, at the school district level, and at the state level. The authors advise local school systems to release their test scores as soon as they receive them, instead of waiting for the state department of education to do so. As they point out, "Advance release gives local school districts the advantage of initiative." It also "reduces the likelihood of public panic when the state report comes out."

Preparation for release of assessment results should begin before the tests are even administered. School administrators should realize that results will mean different things to different segments of the public and should tailor their presentation accordingly. Dissemination "should be persuasive in nature," meaning that it should be aimed at encouraging various publics to support the overall goal of educational improvement.

These suggestions, backed up by sample feedback surveys and other materials taken from Michigan's and Maryland's dissemination efforts, should aid administrators in minimizing difficulties that can arise when test results come out.

8. New York State School Boards Association. ***Communications Public Relations. A Handbook on School-Community Relations. Revised.*** Albany, New York: 1973. 82 pages. ED 127 707.

"There is no need to ask if your board has a public relations program. ***It does, whether you know it or not,***" according to the authors of this PR handbook. In the absence of a coherent PR policy, the school board performs this key function inadvertently and, usually, badly. The intent of this handbook is to assist school boards to substitute a well-planned and effectively executed PR program for one marked by inadvertence and happenstance.

Written for use by school board members, the handbook emphasizes the pivotal role the board plays in interpreting the community to the schools and, conversely, interpreting the

schools to the community. Board members have great impact on public perceptions of the schools, according to the authors, because board members are school taxpayers like other citizens and are unpaid for their school service. What board members say "is heard differently and is apt to be credited more fully."

Even though the board, as "top management," should take the initiative in policy formation, PR objectives can be met only with the cooperation of "the entire school community." The authors favor the team approach over formation of a separate PR department, except in very large school districts. Teachers, and to a slightly lesser degree, other staff members (bus drivers, aides, secretaries) play an especially important role in the success or failure of any PR effort.

Once the school PR team is committed to improving school-community relations, the board can begin to develop "the most effective means of communication with the maximum number of people in the district." To achieve this goal, the board needs to be thoroughly acquainted with the concerns and information needs of the community (to be ascertained through an opinion survey), with the variety of media potentially available for disseminating information, and with the processes of producing, writing, and placing news so that the district maintains good relations with the press.

9. Ondrasik, Barbara P. "Get Good Vibes from a Versatile House Organ." ***Journal of Educational Communication,*** 2, 2 (Winter 1977), pp. 12-21. EJ 160 469.

Good school public relations begin at home with a staff newsletter that answers the need of school employees to know what's going on, according to Ondrasik, editor of an award-winning school district newsletter. If employees are "to feel part of the team," they must be well informed. And if the school staff newsletter does a good job of informing, employees will more likely function as the district's "most valuable PR asset."

Ondrasik's article is filled with concrete suggestions on how (and how not) to write and publish a newsletter. She emphasizes that some form of effective staff newsletter can be assembled on even a very small budget. But she points out that "if your school system has 'no money' for a regular staff publication of some kind, then it really needs to rethink its priorities."

A staff newsletter's credibility is contingent on presentation of the truth, even about controversial matters. A newsletter should not function as a management mouthpiece. As Ondrasik cautions, "Avoid, at all costs, having your newsletter sound like a pontifical edict issued from the isolated, insulated 'ivory tower.' "

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Noting that even some of the best school district newsletters tend to be "weak and wordy," Ondrasik counsels using plain English instead of educationese, keeping sentences and paragraphs short, condensing copy where possible, and carefully editing everything (even the superintendent's annual message to the troops).

Her article includes samples of newsletter front pages from school districts around the country.

10. Powell, James. "Work Stoppages and Public Relations: Winning the War of Words." ***New Jersey School Leader,*** 3, 4 (January-February 1975), pp. 19-20. EJ 112 415.

"Why do strikers generally capture public sentiment and support even though an objective look at the facts would lead observers to other conclusions?" Powell's answer to this question is that management teams do a poor job of communicating their positions to their communities—in other words, they fail at practicing elementary public relations throughout the collective bargaining process.

Powell advises the management side to carry out an ongoing communications program in order to ensure that "dependable information about school programs and policies" reaches the community. The program should build a climate of public trust in the board of education and the district administration.

The district leadership needs to select an effective communicator to represent management's side—a public relations representative who can act as "the board's field marshal." Powell suggests that this communicator try to work with the employee bargaining team's PR representative to develop joint news releases. But management-generated press releases should "carefully spell out the costs of the demands rejected by the board."

If the management team believes that the press is inadequately covering the board's position, it should purchase advertising space to convey its message. If unlawful behavior on behalf of strikers occurs, "public relations techniques," such as "quickly informing the news media of any union abuses and hiring a photographer to provide evidence" of disruption, can be effectively employed, according to Powell.

11. Schaub, Alfred R. "The Power of Poor Communications." ***Journal of Educational Communication,*** 1, 2 (September-October 1975), pp. 4-5. EJ 137 967.

A common assumption in the literature on organizational communication and public relations is that poor communications result from a lack of training—that if organization members only know how to communicate effectively, they would automatically do so. Schaub, however, takes a different position. He believes that "faulty communications are often consciously or unconsciously engineered to assist individuals in their quest for power." He maintains that management personnel especially are quite skilled in communication techniques. Their failure to constructively utilize these skills arises from specific "power-related" problems that characterize organizational life in many institutions, including the schools.

According to Schaub, the most common cause of poor communications is "giving time and energy to more visible, self-serving activities" rather than to improving communications. Even though administrators frequently pay lip service to such improvement, the fact remains that the improvement process is time consuming, that the payoff is hard to measure, and that improved communications frequently are "of more benefit and reward to others than ourselves."

Poor communications also result from a wish to avoid confrontation with others, especially when open communication would involve a discussion of (and disagreement over) controversial issues or personal values. A related problem is the tendency of managers to react negatively to employees who articulate problems. As Schaub states, "Bearers of bad news often lose their heads."

Schaub does believe that good communication and smooth organizational relations are possible. But he counsels managers not to be naive in their quest for improved communication. Schaub's observations offer a valuable (though not necessarily pleasant) counterpoint to the facile optimism evinced by many communications and PR writers.

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